

**Remarks for Secy. LaHood
Alabama Distracted Driving Summit
Birmingham, AL
Dec. 3, 2009**

Good morning, everyone.

Three days ago, a woman in upstate New York was killed when her car collided with a tractor-trailer at an intersection.

Three weeks ago, a similar tragedy occurred when a Texas teenager died after driving her station wagon into a tractor-trailer.

Authorities in both cases said the women were texting while driving when these accidents occurred.

These recent tragedies remind us why we're here today.

I want to thank the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and the Transportation Centers in Birmingham and Tuscaloosa, for sharing our sense of urgency about this problem. By picking up where we left off a few months ago, this summit – the first of its kind outside of Washington -- will help to continue our national conversation on distracted driving and put more good ideas on the table.

I'm especially grateful to Dr. Russ Fine and Dr. Despina Stavrinos [*Dess-PEE-na STAV-rih-noss*] from UAB, Dr. John Lee from the University of Wisconsin, and Dr. Melvin Davis from Jackson State University, for their contributions to our Washington summit, and for carrying the ball forward with their colleagues.

Some transportation accidents are caused by mechanical failure, harsh weather, or other factors beyond our immediate control.

That's not the case with distracted driving.

This is a serious problem – a life-and-death problem – that's a consequence of behavior.

People who don't pay attention to their driving can kill or injure themselves, or cause grave harm to others, in the blink of an eye.

Nearly 6,000 people died last year in crashes involving a distracted driver.

I have met with several victims of these crashes – parents who have lost children, and children who have lost parents.

I've talked with Dave and Judy Teater from Grand Rapids, Michigan, whose 12-year-old son died after a driver on a cell phone ran a red light and hit their car.

And Jennifer Smith, whose mother was killed in Oklahoma City last year by a teenager talking on a cell phone.

Their stories are heart-breaking, and they're especially terrible because these crashes were preventable.

This isn't just a research problem, a public health problem, or a law enforcement problem. It's a human problem.

It's about people of all ages and backgrounds making bad decisions that have terrible consequences.

And it's not just private citizens taking these risks – it's also train conductors, truck drivers, motor coach and school bus drivers – and even airline pilots.

Meanwhile, the list of temptations that can potentially distract drivers keeps on growing – from smart phones and laptops to unwrapping a burger, or reaching for something in the back seat.

If there's any good news here, it's that we know there are proven strategies to help us deal with this.

Decades of experience with drunk driving has taught us it takes a consistent combination of education, effective enforcement, a committed judiciary, and collective efforts by local, state, and national advocates like MADD, SADD, and the Triple "A" to make a dent in the problem.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration credits efforts like these with pushing drunk-driving fatalities to their lowest level last year since federal record-keeping began in 1982.

Likewise, years of regulatory action, cooperation from the auto industry, and effective public outreach have made seat-belt use the single most effective way to save lives on the road.

Successes like these teach us that drivers can and do adapt and change over time.

But we also know we face an uphill battle when it comes to distracted driving. In fact, our work has only just begun.

A troubling new survey from the Pew Research Center found that among 16- and 17-year old American teens, upwards of 70 percent say they've been in a car while the driver was texting. That's nearly 7 in 10 teenage drivers on the road at any given moment who are scarcely paying attention to what's in front of them, if at all!

And roughly half the teens surveyed admitted to being in a car when the driver put them in danger – or endangered others -- while using a cell phone.

In general, on any given day last year, more than 800,000 vehicles were driven by someone using a hand-held cell phone during the day.

So we can pass tough laws, install safety devices, and run splashy ad campaigns – and we should do all these things -- but it will take more than that to get through to people who don't follow the rules, especially young drivers.

Parents need to set clear ground rules for their teenage drivers – and reinforce them. Parents should also practice what they preach.

Teens need to be willing to exert peer pressure – to tell friends they won't get in the car with a driver who insists on talking or texting – just as many now do with friends who have been drinking. Employers need to recognize that when workers leave the office, they're off-line until they arrive at their next destinations.

And everybody needs to use common sense, and take personal responsibility, every single time they get behind the wheel.

I will continue to speak out about distracted driving -- and keep this at the top of our national transportation safety agenda -- because lives are at stake every day. President Obama shares our sense of urgency, which is why he issued an executive order in October banning federal employees from texting while driving when they're on official government business – or using a government-issued device like a Blackberry.

At DOT, we're moving forward on several fronts.

We're working with the Federal Communications Commission on a joint effort to evaluate technology that may help curb distracted driving.

We've awarded demonstration grants in two states with handheld cell phone laws – New York and Connecticut – to test the extent to which communities comply with high-visibility law enforcement activity.

And we're taking action to ban texting or restrict cell phone use in trains, trucks, and interstate buses.

We're also seeking to disqualify school bus drivers convicted of texting while driving from maintaining their commercial drivers' licenses.

In addition, we'll continue to work with Congress to ensure that our safety priorities, and adequate criminal justice resources, are reflected in new legislation, including the new surface transportation bill.

We appreciate the serious attention many states are giving to the issue: At least 46 states so far have introduced bills banning distracted driving in one form or another, and we hope the rest will follow their lead, including Alabama. I know Governor Riley is working hard on this issue.

It's also encouraging to see that both the insurance and telecommunications industries are engaged in the search for solutions.

The United States enjoys one of the best transportation safety records in the world.

Let's work together to keep it that way.

I'm looking forward to hearing from all the experts here today on what we can do to discourage distracted driving.

And I promise you that DOT will be your partner in the effort to find effective solutions that will help to protect our communities and the traveling public.

Thank you very much.